



Society : Ruislip Operatic Society  
Production : Blitz!  
Date : 26<sup>th</sup> March 2010  
Venue : Winston Churchill Theatre  
Report by : Tony Austin

## Report

I have reported before on the inventive ways ROS have brightened their municipal venue to enhance the atmosphere for the sort of feelgood musicals we often enjoy from them, but never have I been as impressed as by the way they caught the real spirit of wartime on this occasion with auditorium lights dimmed, smoky mist in the air and on stage a fine representation of a dingy platform on Bank Tube Station, with from somewhere the gentle sound of a radio broadcasting popular songs of the day. And then from the BBC an urgent news flash for people in the Ruislip area urging them to turn off electrical equipment to avoid detection, followed by the drone of aircraft overhead and the Air Raid Siren, realistic enough to send shivers down the spine as the genuine noise did seventy years ago. And the realism continued on stage as families spilled down the stairs to the platform, found places where they could sit, mostly on the floor, and prepared for another night sheltering from the bombing in *Our Hotel*, as the song put it, started by Mrs Blitztein and spreading slowly through the rest of the East Enders as a symbol of their resilience and defiance, their spirits obviously rising with the music until, with never a sense of a chorus line, different dance movements gradually caught on for a rousing finale filling the whole stage.

The rest of the opening scene could be set as a test for any director, with virtually the whole cast on stage sheltering from the air raid while all the main characters needed to be introduced and their alliances and conflicts established, achieved with remarkable clarity in **Ann Hertler-Smith**'s fine production in which I almost always found myself looking at the character who was speaking and, except when the Band was playing an underscore too loudly, understanding the dialogue. Difficult on the technical side as well with complete realism of the passing tube trains impossible without a west End budget but a very acceptable combination of sound and light in its place, another radio broadcast nicely put over by **David Bendall** as the Announcer (I'm afraid **Barbara Johnson**'s contribution, whenever it came, was drowned by other noises) with pauses for interjections from the stage, and then the Prime Minister's rallying speech (rather understated, I thought, until told it was the real **Winston Churchill** – speaking perhaps for the first time in his very own Theatre). Also appearing in person on the original 1960s recording, **Vera Lynn** gave the pastiche war ballad *The Day After Tomorrow* a wonderful start, to be joined the Company humming, then standing and singing for the second verse and eventually accompanied by the Band for a really affecting ending. Fine individual reactions from the **Ensemble** and sound by **AB Lighting** also kept up the realism of the bombing overhead until the All Clear sounded and the trudge back up the stairs began.

The next test was on the scenic side. How would they cope with the change to above ground, accomplished in the West End on a specially strengthened stage by Sean Kenny designing the first self-moving scenery towers whose unprecedented movements then formed part of the evening's enjoyment? It couldn't be a fast change, but accompanied by the Band with a glorious Big Band sound, and silhouetted against super dawn effects from **Andrew Bird**'s realistically subdued lighting plot, the Tube Station disappeared and stepped rostra and Orphanage Gates took us on to the evacuation of the children. Designed by **Alan Bailey** and made by him with **Les Dearlove, John Edwards, Mark Alcock** and **Company**, with advice and 'generosity' from **Bob 'Jock' Kerr**, scenic sewing from **Angela Evans** and Artwork from **Malcolm Unwin** and **Others**, the scenery and the inventively used rostra proved perfect for representing various locations in the East End (some with War damage, including one scene where onstage a building was still burning following a raid) as well as Victoria Station, and at the end to provide a real coup de theatre, an explosion causing with brilliant realism the collapse of a high wall in a shower of bricks, in which the leading lady disappeared and from which we thought she would not reappear even if her character was supposed to have survived. But she did, and we got some welcome front-cloth reprises while the efficient **Crew** under SM **Pam Bailey** and ASM **Andrea Bright** cleared up the war damage.

That leading lady, **Sheila Rawles**, playing the sometimes far-from-ladylike Mrs Blitztein, gave an amazingly realistic portrait of a Jewish matriarch struggling to keep her family together by running her pickled herring stall, demonstrating with no hint of caricature the coarseness to deal with the gibes of her non-Jewish neighbours, the strength to reject her ne'er-do-well elder son and the tenderness to welcome him back when he reformed, and all the anguish involved in dealing with her daughter's love for a non-Jewish boy. Superbly leading so much of the singing as well, including the gentle *Lullaby* for her younger son, the rip-roaring *Who's This Geezer Hitler*, the reflective *Petticoat Lane* and the joyous *Is This Gonna be a Wedding!*, she made her two solo set pieces into brilliant character studies, in *Bake a Cake* showing clearly Mrs Blitztein's way of suppressing grief and getting on with life (while in 1962 I had just found it embarrassingly sub-*Oliver*) and her appeal to her dead husband for advice in *So Tell Me Jack* given completely from the heart (surely the source of the inspiration for Tevye's talking to God in *Fiddler on the Roof* which premiered a year after *Blitz*). Even the fairytale reconciliations at the end were played straight and true, investing them with more reality than I would have thought possible in these modern cynical times. A fantastic, extended character study, a real tour-de-force, giving life to the whole show.

Although all other roles were reduced to bit parts by comparison, fine support came from the rest of the Blitzteins and others, with **Sean Sullivan**'s few lines as young Siddey put over clearly and **Carl Quaif** establishing his character as anti-hero, soldier son Harry, before vanishing to the arms of non-Jewish Mrs Matthews (**Nazalia Davidson**, nicely showing her despair later after his further desertions) and then to the wiles of **Paul Hunter** (immediately establishing his surprisingly Scottish, wide-boy, looter character) and only returning finally to the fold for a most unlikely, up-beat *Duty Calls* (surely the pre-cursor of *Flash, Bang, Wallop* in *Half a Sixpence* a year later) prior to his arrest as a deserter, although I felt that if the character deserved that song (as the performer certainly did) it should have merited equally unlikely up-beat lighting as part of the fairy-tale ending instead of being given in the rather duller general wash. More angst for their mother from daughter Carol, played nicely low-key but determinedly by **Becky Miles**, in love with **Joseph Herson**'s shy Georgie, son of the Blitztein's chief gentile tormentor. I, and I think the Sound Operator, would have liked just a little more volume from both in dialogue and singing to help them get all their spoken words over and to compete with the Band as they explained their love in *Opposites*, sung charmingly and with a really stylish soft-shoe dance, and in her *Far Away*, where the amplification needed to be turned up so far that the sound was unfortunately distorted. But their characters were put over with conviction, her blindness being suitably shown, and his shock reaction, drunk scene, and jazzy *Who Wants to Settle Down?* (assisted by **the children**) very skilfully played, before their touching reunion and kiss (causing a howl from their turned-up microphones) led to their wedding celebrations (again presaging *Fiddler on the Roof*): the joyous end to the real, believable story.

**Alan Bailey**, as Mr Locke, Georgie's father, had a fine time making his character's abuse of the Jewish residents seem real, and combining with **Les Dearlove**'s character study of pessimistic Warden Mr Nearmiss in the properly OTT *As Long as This is Eng-a-land* (the perfect place for the lighting also to do an OTT and out-of-period celebration) and many well-judged comic interludes, while **Alec Coles-Aldridge** displayed clear dialogue and authority beyond his years as Military Policeman Bobby Smith and **Malcolm Unwin** as Mr Josephs advertised his "Beigals" (after special tuition, I'm told) as if to the manner born. As Mrs Josephs, **Helen Bailey** provided essential Jewish support to Mrs Blitztein in lots of the first Act dialogue, as she also did on the music side in the second Act, while **Susan Maycraft** as Elsie, with notable assistance from **Hannah Bailey** as Peg, **Jackie Quaif** as Mrs Murphy and **the children**, excelled leading the singing and dancing in the upbeat *Leave It to the Ladies*, *Down the Lane* and *Is This Gonna Be a Wedding*. With everyone on stage being shown in the programme as a named character, the other **Members of the Adult Ensemble** must forgive me for not mentioning them individually, even where they were obviously identifiable, since their contributions counted more towards enhancing the general atmosphere of the East End during wartime, which was very strongly shown with every member seeming to be an integral part of that community, than to the establishing of their particular characters. The way in which they remained in character during all the events of the Blitz, and in character decided to join in the expressions of defiance in the musical numbers made their contribution unique in all my experience of musicals. And the choreography was also different from anything I remember on stage or on film, seeming to be the sort of thing which real people would do in the circumstances, although it was far better plotted and choreographed, and as it progressed to the climaxes of the numbers became so much more co-ordinated and executed than any ordinary street party could achieve.

The **Members of the Juvenile Ensemble** (ages 9 to 13, as I was told that evening) also achieved a fantastically realistic depiction of East End children in wartime, whether they were with their families in the Tube Station Shelter (nicely subdued, then coming together to play as the adults were otherwise engaged and finally joining in the anthem with individuality), or portraying individual orphans about to be evacuated or returned from evacuation in *We're Going to (We've Been to See) the Country*, sung loud and clear with tremendously drilled marching movements, or joining in and eventually leading *Who's This Geezer Hitler* and so many of the other Chorus numbers. Completely at home on the stage, and able to communicate their enjoyment to us all at great volume and with perfect precision, particularly perhaps in (Let's Play) *Mums and Dads*, where the contrapuntal send-up of warring parents really took their fancy and ours too with the extra delight of its final reprise with completely different (but equally well-drilled and co-ordinated) movements. Take a bow all you amazing juvenile stars: **Sean Sullivan, Hanny Alcock, James Collins, Daniel Brennand, Alice Green, Hollie Summerfield, Olivia Brennand, Niamh Cannon, Chris Knapp, Evan Bevis-Knowles, Louie Swallow and Katrina Grace**. What a fantastic contribution you made to the best show I have ever seen on the Winston Churchill stage!

Musical Director **Robert Wicks** had ensured that everyone was confident in their singing of Lionel Bart's thoroughly tuneful numbers and his eleven Band Members played them well and revelled in the instrumental interludes which allowed them to play as a Big Band of the period. I would have been willing to swap that sound, however, in a hall with the acoustics of the Winston Churchill, for the ability to accompany things more softly to enable dialogue over music to be easily heard.

As always, **ROS's volunteers** ensured quality support with the programme by **Kinetic** (photography by **Will Unwin**) top rate for design and content, authentic looking costumes co-ordinated by **Wendy Godwin** with help from **Marita Brown, Anthea Prosser**, the **Compass Theatre** and **WOS**, perfect period props (although thank goodness the gas masks didn't have to come out of their cardboard cases) by **Bonnie and Mike Joyce**, with carts and other handmade items by **Alan Bailey, Les Dearlove** and the late **John Edwards**, for whom all local societies will echo the heartfelt ROS programme tribute.

Congratulations to Director and Choreographer **Ann Hertler-Smith** for a triumphant production with so many clever touches beautifully achieved, including having the Soldiers offstage for the Quick March to end the first Act – but with the watchers onstage so beautifully positioned and instructed that we didn't notice we had missed anything: proper stage magic (I wonder what else I missed).

My thanks and congratulations to everyone involved for a really outstanding evening, as well as to the ROS Front of House Team, and especially President **Barbara Johnson** for the welcome, the hospitality and all the insights passed on during our interval chat. I look forward to *Little Shop of Horrors*.